

## Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY PANAMA PRIORITY

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TAGS:

SUBJECT: NEW YORK TIMES'EDITORIAL ON PANAMA

FOLLOWING EDITORIAL,ENTITLED "THE PANAMA ISSUE," APPEARED  
IN THE NEW YORK TIMES OF APRIL 17, 1976:

QUOTE - RONALD REAGAN, TRYING DESPERATELY TO KEEP ALIVE  
HIS BID FOR THE REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION, HAS  
RESORTED TO DEMAGOGUERY AND DISTORTION IN ACCUSING THE  
FORD ADMINISTRATION OF PLANNING SURREPTITIOUSLY TO "GIVE  
AWAY" THE PANAMA CANAL AND ZONE. IS MR. FORD SO FRIGHTENED  
OF THE REAGAN CANDIDACY THAT HE FELT IT NECESSARY TO RESPOND  
TO THIS CHEAP SHOT BY APPEARING TO BACK OFF FROM AN ENTIRELY  
HONORABLE AND ESSENTIAL POLICY ON THE PANAMANIAN PROBLEM?

MR. REAGAN PERPETUATES A DANGEROUS MYTH WHEN HE SAYS THE  
CANAL ZONE IS "SOVEREIGN UNITED STATES TERRITORY." IT  
IS NOT AND NEVER HAS BEEN. HE ACTS IRRESPONSIBLY, TO PUT  
IT MILDLY, WHEN HE REFERS TO PANAMA'S LEADER, GEN. OMAR  
TORRIJOS, AS "THAT TIN-HORN DICTATOR," WHO MUST BE TOLD  
IN NO UNCERTAIN TERMS THAT THE UNITED STATES INTENDS TO  
KEEP CONTROL OF THE 500-SQUARE-MILE ZONE THAT BISECTS THE  
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REPUBLIC OF PANAMA. GENERAL TORRIJOS HAS ACTED THUS

FAR WITH RESPONSIBILITY AND PATIENCE ON THIS EXPLOSIVE ISSUE.

UNFORTUNATELY, MR. REAGAN'S SNIPING GOADED THE PRESIDENT TO SAY, WHILE CAMPAIGNING IN TEXAS: "THE UNITED STATES WILL NEVER GIVE UP ITS DEFENSE RIGHTS TO THE PANAMA CANAL AND WILL NEVER GIVE UP ITS OPERATIONAL RIGHTS AS FAR AS PANAMA IS CONCERNED." WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY RON NESSEN NOW CONCEDES THAT MR. FORD'S REMARKS LACKED "PRECISION AND DETAIL," AND THAT CURRENT NEGOTIATIONS WITH PANAMA AIM TO MAINTAIN AMERICAN INTERESTS IN THE ZONE "DURING THE USEFUL LIFE OF THE CANAL," OR FROM 30 TO 50 YEARS.

THE FACT IS THAT UNDER THE "AGREEMENT ON PRINCIPLES," SIGNED MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO BY SECRETARY OF STATE KISSINGER AND PANAMA'S FOREIGN MINISTER, THIS COUNTRY COMMITTED ITSELF TO NEGOTIATE A NEW TREATY THAT WOULD TERMINATE UNITED STATES JURISDICTION OVER THE ZONE AND EVENTUALLY GIVE OVER THE OPERATION OF THE CANAL TO PANAMA. THE UNITED STATES WOULD CONTINUE TO SHARE IN THE CANAL'S DEFENSE ON TERMS TO BE AGREED IN THE TREATY.

IN SIGNING THIS DECLARATION, MR. KISSINGER WAS CONTINUING A GENERAL LINE OF POLICY BEGUN IN PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S ADMINISTRATION THAT RECOGNIZES THE CANAL ZONE AS A RELIC OF "MANIFEST DESTINY," A COLONIAL ENCLAVE NO LONGER ACCEPTABLE TO ANY SOVEREIGN STATE. MR. JOHNSON HAD WISELY DECIDED AFTER SERIOUS 1964 RIOTING IN THE ZONE THAT A NEW RELATIONSHIP WAS NECESSARY IF UNINTERRUPTED PASSAGE OF THE CANAL WERE TO BE SECURED FOR THE FUTURE ALONG WITH A UNITED STATES SHARE IN ITS DEFENSE.

THIS ATTITUDE, ADOPTED BY PRESIDENT NIXON AND, PRESUMABLY, BY MR. FORD, NEED BE NO POLITICAL LIABILITY IF THE PRESIDENT UNDERSTOOD IT WELL ENOUGH TO EXPLAIN IT TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE AS THE ABSOLUTE PREREQUISITE FOR A VIABLE NITED STATES POLICY TOWARD LATIN AMERICA. END QUOTE. ROBINSON

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